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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF:

Welfare Division Budget

Assembly Committee on Ways and Means

Senate Committee on Finance

JOINT SUBCOMMITTEE ON K-12/HUMAN RESOURCES

March 4, 2003

Chairman Rawson, Chairwoman Leslie and members of the Committee, for the record I am Teresa Benitez, Board Member with Nevada Empowered Women's Project. I am also serving as your Miss Nevada 2002. I regret I cannot be with you in person today. The obligations of my school tour make it impossible for me to be present for the very important discussion taking place this morning.

My message to the committee is simple: Nevada's impoverished families will not be able to weather reductions in grant levels to Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, nor restricted eligibility to TANF. Nevada's impoverished families need a strong social safety net to guard them in turbulent economic times. To reduce grant levels and "cap" access to TANF is unconscionable. I can relate all too well with the struggles low-income families face, and it wasn't very long ago that my family RELIED on assistance from the state.

When my Mother married my biological Father, she thought she had chosen a partner for life. She never imagined that such a caring man would battle addiction to alcohol, and eventually become abusive. My Mother never intended for her marriage to end in divorce. Yet, she made the decision to leave when my Father's abuse put my two sisters and my life at stake. My Mother suddenly found herself starting over from scratch, supporting three children on the tips of a waitress. This was our introduction into the world of poverty. I lived and experienced hardship first hand. So much so that it made me an unofficial expert on poverty.

I vividly recall how hard my mother had to work to provide for two sisters and myself. I remember this battle becoming much more intense on July 25, 1994, the day of my 16th birthday, when my 15 year old sister gave birth to a son.

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As Miss Nevada, I travel the state sharing my family's story with numerous audiences. I do so because it's important for people to see the true face of poverty. People do not chose to live a life of poverty, and certainly no mother consciously chooses to raise her children in poverty. Rather, stumbling blocks and barriers exist which trap families in poverty. Programs such as TANF and Medicaid, when properly administered, are tools to help families become economically self-sufficient.

For my family, programs such as then Aid to Families with Dependent Children and Food Stamps made the difference between paying rent or not; between affording food, or depending on our family's charity. My sister would not have receive prenatal care for my nephew had it not been for Medicaid.

There is a tendency to believe that poverty is caused by some moral defect...that you are person of low moral character, rather than a victim of circumstance and economy. I believe nothing could be further from the truth. My mother utilized public assistance to rebuild our family after it was torn apart by domestic violence, just as approximately 30% of all recipients on TANF do, according to National Resource Center on Domestic Violence.

There are currently more than 31,000 children and families on TANF. I cannot consciously turn a blind eye on families who remind me so much of my own! I am a product of the welfare system! I am a graduate of the University of Nevada, Reno and have been accepted to the University of Michigan's Master of Social Work Program. I was named Third Runner-Up to Miss America, and am the first Miss Nevada in 16 years to have been named into the Top Ten at Miss America. I am even more proud to tell you that my sister will graduate next year with her degree from the University of Nevada, Reno.

We cannot write off Nevada's poor! There is potential to be actualized. TANF is much more than assistance program...it's an investment! We cannot cap access to TANF nor decrease grant levels. These programs are keeping women and children from living out of shelters and cars! Additionally, we must provide enough caseworkers to adequately process applicant, so deserving families don't loose out.

In closing, I would like to extend an invitation to the committee members to walk in the shoes of low-income single mother, who comprise 97% of TANF roles. Please feel free

to email me at missnevada@hotmail.com, should you wish to accompany for half a day,
experiencing the realities of poverty.

I thank you for your time.

Teresa Benitez

Miss Nevada 2002